

The Last Rosenwald School of Burke County, North Carolina: An Historic Gem Recognized



The Legacy of John C. and Martha R. Corpening

2016 Award of Excellence
from the
North Carolina
Society of Historians

Christopher Hunt Robertson, M.Ed.

ISBN: 9781312673519



This was the first published history of Burke's Rosenwald Schools.
The following year, on 11-1-2016, Burke County unveiled its Rosenwald Educational Exhibit for the Burke County Museum of History.

NC Society of
Historians
2016 Award of
Excellence

**The Last Rosenwald School of Burke County, NC: An Historic Gem Recognized
- Legacy of John C. and Martha Rutherford Corpening -**

Christopher Hunt Robertson, M.Ed.

ISBN: 978-1-312-67351 - © Lulu Press, Inc. (October 2015 – November 2016)

Right Photo: Rosenwald (Canal) School of Bridgewater.



Like every community, Burke County, NC, has chapters of its history that are challenging . . .

Like many other Americans, many Burke Countians would rather focus on the future than the past. Like most of the old South, Burke had its share of racial prejudice. Although Burke was a gateway to NC's western region, its historically large African-American population was more like the piedmont region to its east than the mountain region to its west. Tens of thousands of slaves built Burke's railroads, farmed its plantations, and toiled in its gold mines. And when slavery was abolished, Burke's economy collapsed.

In recent years, many counties across North Carolina and the South have made an effort to recover the history of the region's largest historical minority. To do otherwise distorts history and shows disrespect for those who made progress happen at considerable cost. Given Burke's historically large black population and the substantial contributions of African-Americans to Burke's early economy, it is imperative that Burke's few remaining African-American historic sites be documented, preserved and presented.

Like the rest of the South, the evolution of formal education for Burke's African-American citizens was a long and difficult road. While Burke County did experience the prejudice typical of Southern communities, the educational facilities for the County's African-American children did improve from the 1910's onward. The construction of Burke's five Rosenwald schools was a successful building project and should be remembered as an enduring expansion of public education facilities to better include and serve Burke's African-American children.

Over time, Burke's African-American historical sites have nearly all disappeared, erasing whole chapters of Burke's history. But in 2016, Burke's County Commissioners honored the County's five Rosenwald schools with a permanent memorial. And the History Museum and Morganton Public Library are continuing their educational efforts, including recent presentations on "The Civil Rights Era in Burke County."

Introducing Several Forgotten Historic Burke County Sites:

**The School, Principal's House, Church and Cemetery of the
Family of John C. and Martha Rutherford Corpening**

Many NC counties have documented, or even restored, their historic Rosenwald schools to honor the educational accomplishments of their early African-American citizens. In Burke County, several historic sites remain to represent a locally prominent African-American family of pioneering educators, and to represent the other nine early African-American schools (including four other Rosenwald schools) that perished. The house of Rosenwald principal Bessie Pearl Corpening is weakening so documentation is urgently needed while it still stands. The Rosenwald (Canal) School is sturdy enough for the preservation efforts that are urgently needed. Near the house, the family cemetery of John C. and Martha Rutherford Corpening represents early educational philanthropists. Hopefully, the Bridgewater community, historical organizations and Burke's citizens will together find a way to document, preserve and present these irreplaceable sites.

Until 2014, none of the local historical organizations were aware that the historic school still existed on the rural western edge of the county. (The NC State Historic Preservation Office confirmed that the school's existence had never been reported to them.)

In 2015, I found evidence showing that Bessie Corpening's "Rosenwald School" in Bridgewater was named "Canal School" during its initial construction phase. That allowed us, for the first time, to link the surviving Rosenwald School with its original application - proving that the Corpenings' school was indeed a part of the Rosenwald Movement that transformed African-American education in Burke County and throughout the South.



- Note Added in 2018 -

Since this work was published in 2015, a local curator has claimed that portions of two Rosenwald schools may still be serving Burke County: Willow Tree as apartments, and McAlpine (originally McElrath's Chapel) as a long-term care facility. Evidence for these claims has not been reviewed.

A secondary building from the Olive Hill School complex, apparently not part of the original Rosenwald "Morganton School" structure, now serves as an education resource center. (Burke County Schools should be commended for recently renaming that building, "Olive Hill," to recognize its history.)

The Rosenwald School of Bridgewater still appears to be the only complete Rosenwald school to stand in Burke County as originally built. If the front porch and rear extension were removed, the remaining structure would appear much like its 1927 photo.

As of 2018, there remains the possibility that the Rosenwald School of Bridgewater may one day be added to the National Historic Register for Burke County, or even preserved for future generations.



In 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation was issued by Abraham Lincoln, announcing the end of Southern slavery. For the next hundred years, however, Southern African-American citizens were marginalized socially and politically.

Burke County, like the rest the South, operated under Jim Crow laws. The NC Museum of History has stated, "Under the cruel system known as Jim Crow, people of color lost their right to vote and were generally oppressed by segregation laws and social customs."

To show a more complete and balanced historical perspective, Southern counties, cities, and towns must document, preserve and present their local historical African-American sites.

Many NC counties have documented, or even restored, their historic Rosenwald schools to honor the educational accomplishments of their early black citizens. (Some of the schools have reverted to public use, as libraries, senior adult centers, community centers, educational tutoring offices, museums, public computer facilities, etc.) Although the ubiquitous "served in rear" signs depicted past attitudes, these counties have decided that the historical representation of their local black citizens, from some of the oldest lineages in their counties, will not be "served in rear" today.

Burke County has preserved a plantation house but has not yet preserved any African-American structures. There is one permanent plaque: in 2002, it was placed in the 500 block of West Concord Street by the Burke County Public School Board to mark the area where the historic Olive Hill School once stood.

Burke has apparently lost nine of its ten early African-American schools, including four of its five Rosenwald schools. None of the lost schools were documented. Only the Rosenwald (Canal) School remains, with the house of its principal, Bessie Pearl Corpening, standing in disrepair nearby.



Shown in the lower right corner of this photo is the historic home of Bessie Pearl Corpening, principal of the Rosenwald (Canal) School. It remains undocumented. This house in Bridgewater is located on private property but the owner might cooperate with efforts to study the historic structure.

In 1901, under the leadership of Gov. Charles B. Aycock, the NC General Assembly appropriated tax funds for public schools for the first time in the state's history. In 1905, legislation passed requiring all county school boards to provide all children between ages 8 and 16 with at least 16 weeks of education annually. By 1911, 200 public rural high schools were distributed among the state's 100 counties.

These public improvements were of minimal benefit to NC's African-Americans. For them, high quality public education remained elusive.

The 1910's and 1920's brought a glimmer of hope. The NC Historic Preservation Office has stated, "In the 1910's, Chicago philanthropist Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, Roebuck and Co., became aware of the sad state of education among African Americans in the rural South. His response was the establishment of a fund that provided architectural plans and matching grants that helped build more than 5300 schools from Maryland to Texas between the late 1910's and 1932."

Burke County was a big beneficiary of the Rosenwald Movement. Its general public, African-American community and the Rosenwald Foundation together created several Rosenwald schools, including the McAlpine (McElrath's Chapel), Morganton, Rock Hill, and Willow Tree schools.

Another Rosenwald school also served Burke County, the Rosenwald (Canal) School of Bridgewater. It appears to be Burke's last extant early African-American school. The research presented here appears to be the school's first published historical profile.

The impact of the Rosenwald Movement was enormous. The black-white gap in schooling among Southern-born men narrowed sharply between the world wars. From 1914 to 1931, nearly 5,000 schools were constructed as part of the Rosenwald Rural Schools Initiative. Using census data and World War II records, researchers found that the Rosenwald program accounted for a sizable portion of the educational gains of rural Southern blacks. They found significant effects on school attendance, years of schooling, and cognitive test scores. The gains were highest in the most disadvantaged counties, suggesting that schooling treatments had the largest impact among those with limited access to education (Daniel Aaronson and Bhashkar Mazumder, "Journal of Political Economy", Vol. 119, No. 5, Oct. 2011, University of Chicago Press).

There is no doubt that Burke's black families benefited greatly from the Rosenwald schools and Burke's other African-American schools: Drexel, Maple Grove, Mission, and Shiloh.

First organized as a charter school, Olive Hill would become the county's first African-American high school. Pinkney E. Corpening would serve as its principal for 17 years (1921-1938). He then served as principal of the Morganton School for two years (1938-1940).

The 1940's and 1950's were challenging for Burke's African-American citizens as many white Southerners continued to demand segregated schools. Tours of African-American schools showed that their quality was usually inferior.

Finally, on May 17, 1954, in ***Brown v. Board of Education***, the U.S. Supreme Court spoke clearly in a unanimous decision: the segregation of schools must end. For years after this decision, however, Burke County and most of the South moved very slowly in the desegregation process. Today, Burke County is committed to providing the best possible education to all of its citizens.

Despite today's educational improvements in Burke County, the county's public historical record is still incomplete.

Perhaps the Corpenings' Rosenwald (Canal) School might one day be restored as part of a mixed-use complex. For example, the historic school could adjoin a new library or senior center to serve western Burke County. It might also serve as Burke's welcome center to the recreational region of Lake James. Of course, these suggestions assume the support of the property's current owners and the Bridgewater community.

Some NC communities have moved their Rosenwald schools to more populated areas that are conducive to historical tourism.

All of these options require long-term financial commitments and usually require generous private or corporate contributions.

Philanthropy: **CORPENING A.M.E. CHAPEL**

Corpening Chapel Road still runs through the area. Its chapel was named in honor of a former slave, John C. Corpening.

On its site "Picture Burke", the Burke County Public Library reports:
In 1916, John C. Corpening, husband of Martha A. Rutherford Corpening, donated land for the first A.M.E. Church to be built in Bridgewater.

(* A Rutherford family was among Bridgewater's early settlers.)



The Corpening A.M.E. Chapel is located at 2961 Corpening Chapel Road in Morganton. After all these years, it remains an active church. Bessie Corpening's name appears on a plaque at the entrance and the Bessie Corpening Missionary Society was named in her honor.

**School and Church of John and Martha Corpening's Family
in Bridgewater, Burke County, NC**

Philanthropy: **ROSENWALD (CANAL) SCHOOL (Recognition of a Forgotten Historic Site)**

The generosity of this family went well beyond the chapel. **This same Corpening family also contributed land for the construction of a school, and for over two decades pioneered education for Burke County's African-American community.** "Picture Burke" reported: **In the 1920's, John C. Corpening donated land for the building of a Rosenwald school.** (Since John C. Corpening died in 1920, his survivors may have donated the land in his name.) **It is believed that Bessie Pearl Corpening was teaching out of the Corpening Chapel as early as 1916 – before moving into the Rosenwald building built in 1926/1927.**

While interviewing some long-term residents of Bridgewater, I was very pleased to learn of the forgotten Rosenwald (Canal) School. Until 2014, when I informed them, none of the local historical organizations knew that this rural school still existed. It was, however, known to older Bridgewater residents. I contacted the NC State Historic Preservation Office since they maintain files for NC's identified Rosenwald schools: their office confirmed that the existence of a Rosenwald school in Bridgewater had never been reported to them. My research found many listings in old state educational directories of a "Rosenwald School", headed by Bessie Corpening of Bridgewater. Adding to this confusion, primary Rosenwald records never referenced funding for any "Corpening School" or "Rosenwald School" in Burke County.

These questions demanded further research. Older Bridgewater residents referred to their local historic school, recently used as an Elks Lodge, as "Corpening School". Educational directories consistently referred to it as "Rosenwald School". The NC State Preservation Office noted that a satellite image of the building across from the Corpening Chapel appeared to be consistent with historical photos of the "Canal School" provided in official Rosenwald records, yet there were no records that a "Canal School" had ever operated in Burke County! This mystery was finally solved in 2015 when I reviewed several primary documents. A letter dated 8-4-1925 referenced Rosenwald Application 14-E for a "Bridgewater School" in Burke County. Letters dating 3-29-1926 and 4-21-1926 showed that this application was cancelled to reallocate funds to another project. Within one year, Application 39-F had been approved under the name of "Canal School" and it was built in Burke County. (A canal stands two miles west of Bridgewater.) Letters dating 4-13-1927 and 4-30-1927 both mentioned that the name of "Canal School" had been changed to "Rosenwald School". The school had been built as the "Canal School" but only operated as the "Rosenwald School". **This information allowed us, for the first time, to link the surviving school with its initial application - proving the school's Rosenwald affiliation.**

This article announces the continued existence and location of the school. The Rosenwald (Canal) School still stands at 2960 Corpening Chapel Road and is now occasionally used as an Elks Lodge. The vacant house of its principal (Bessie Pearl Corpening), the Corpening A.M.E. Chapel, and the Corpening Family Cemetery also still stand in Bridgewater.

August 4, 1925.

Mr. S. L. Smith,
Commercial Club Building,
Nashville, Tenn.

Dear Mr. Smith:

I enclose herewith applications for aid
as follows:

8-E Anson County Cairo
9-E Tyrrell County Alligator
10-E Hertford County White Oak
11-E McDowell County Marion
12-E Burke County Rock Hill
13-E Burke County McElvath's Chapel
14-E Burke County Bridgewater
15-E Halifax County Eastman
16-E Halifax County Gold Mine Consolidated
17-E Halifax County Euro

You will note that I am applying for \$1,500.00
on the Marion school. I talked with you about it. I trust
that it can be approved for the full amount.

Sincerely yours,

W. F. Credle,
Supervisor.

March 29, 1926

Mr. S. L. Smith,
Commercial Club Bldg.,
Nashville, Tenn.

Dear Mr. Smith:

I am enclosing inspection report on the White Pond
school in Anson County. When I was in this county some
months ago making inspection of other schools the Superintendent
told me he thought it would be impossible to build the White
Pond school this year and I put it on my list for cancellation.
However, sometime in February the Superintendent changed his
mind and informed me that the building would be constructed.
We made the necessary inspections, but I failed to mark it off
the cancelled list.

I shall thank you to cancel the following projects:

No. 14-E Bridgewater School, Burke County
No. 2-E Wayman School, Halifax County

to make room for the White Pond project. I am sure that Bridge-
water cannot be built this year and if Wayman is completed, it
can wait until after July. Please let me know if White Pond
will go back as 42-E or whether it will have to be 32-E our
next number.

The pictures which I am enclosing do not show the
lattice work, however, the contractor was assembling material
the day I was there for the lattice work. It was to be of nice
frame painted green. The roof was to be painted green to match
the lattice work. The White Pond school is indeed a nice build-
ing well located.

With good wishes, I am

Very sincerely yours,

W. F. Credle
Supervisor Rosenwald Fund

C:F

Enc.

These two letters appear in a folder labeled "Correspondence A. L. Smith, 1925-1926" archived by the North Carolina Digital Collections of the State Library of North Carolina. Although cancelled to reallocate funds for another project, Application 14-E appears to have been the community's first effort to establish a Rosenwald school in Bridgewater, Burke County, NC. (Another letter from the same folder, dated 4-21-1926, also notes the cancellation of Application 14-E.)

**School's Phase 1:
"Bridgewater School"
(Application 14-E)**

THE JULIUS ROSENWALD FUND
CHAMBER OF COMMERCE BUILDING
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

S. L. SMITH
GENERAL FIELD AGENT FOR RURAL SCHOOLS

April 13, 1927.

Dear Mr. Credle:

I meant to write you sooner for further information pertaining to the amount of furniture shown on inspection reports 38-F and 71-F, Rosenwald (formerly called Canal) and Rock Hill schools, respectively, in Burke County. I note in 38-F in this nice two-teacher building they have only \$150 worth of second-hand desks and in 71-F only \$50 worth. As the amounts are inadequate for furnishing buildings of their sizes I am wondering if you cannot induce the counties to better equip these and give me a statement of the approximate cost of the difference, so that it might be included in the inspections. You will recall that 71-F is drawing far over your allotment of one-teacher schools. This makes me all the more hopeful that it can come up to the standard in equipment which you have set in your building program.

Trusting to hear from you soon, I am

Mr. W. F. Credle,
Raleigh, North Carolina

Sincerely yours,

S. L. Smith

April 30, 1927

C O P Y

Dear Supt. Allen:

You will find enclosed the Julius Rosenwald Fund check No. 2232 payable to the North Carolina State Department of Public Instruction for \$1,100, to replenish your working capital for disbursements made on the following schools:

Inspection No.	County	School	Amount
38-F	Burke	Rosenwald (Canal)	\$700
71-F	Burke	Rock Hill	400

Enclosure

Sincerely yours,

Supt. A. T. Allen,
Raleigh, North Carolina.

(SIGNED) S. L. SMITH

Note
WFC
SL

These two letters appear in a folder labeled "Correspondence S. L. Smith, 1926-1927" archived by the North Carolina Digital Collections of the State Library of North Carolina. They both show that the Burke County school name in Application 38-F was changed from "Canal School" to "Rosenwald School" during or shortly after the school's initial construction. This explains why the Corpenings' school in Bridgewater never operated as the "Canal School".

**School's Phase 2:
"Canal School"
(Application 38-F)**



Fisk University Rosenwald Card File (Photocopy):

Historic Name	Canal School
Current Name	
Building Plan	Two-teacher type
Building Type	School
Budget Year	1926-27
Current Address	
Land (Acreage)	2.00
County	Burke
State	North Carolina
Application #	38-F
Total Cost	\$3133.00
Notes	Ins. \$1,800
Additional Comments	
Funding Sources	
» Negroes	\$133.00
» Public	\$2,300.00
» Rosenwald	\$700.00

All photos and text on this page
are from the Fisk University
Rosenwald Fund Card File
Database.

School's Phase 3:
"Rosenwald School"
(Corpening School)



Morganton (Olive Hill) School – Built 1923/1924



McAlpine (McElrath's Chapel) School – Built 1925/1926



Rock Hill School – Built 1926/1927



Willow Tree School – Built 1925/1926

Burke County's Other Rosenwald Schools

All photos shown here are from Fisk University's
Rosenwald Fund Card File Database.

Many questions regarding Burke County's Rosenwald schools remain unanswered. Future researchers may want to review records of Burke County's several local school systems: the Burke, Glen Alpine and City of Morganton systems. The Glen Alpine system of western Burke County, which apparently included the Rosenwald (Canal) School, had its own superintendent. My review of the annual editions of educational directories did reveal some information, as shown below. Smaller "colored" primary schools were not listed in the directories until 1938/1939 so the educational directories should not be considered as comprehensive.

School	Rosenwald Status and Years Corpening Family Leadership Indicated	Sources for Table Shown Left:
Olive Hill School	The Olive Hill School was operating as an African-American high school in Morganton by 1925. It later moved into the Rosenwald building known as "Morganton School". Pinkney "Pink" E. Corpening began serving as principal of Morganton's African-American schools in 1921. From 1925 until his death in 1940, educational directories associated P.E. Corpening with either "Olive Hill School" or "Morganton School". Olive Hill, started as a "special charter school" but later made a public school, was Burke's first African-American high school, fully accredited (by segregated standards) in 1930.	<u>1925/1926</u> : "High Schools of NC: Public and Private, White and Colored, Urban and Rural, A Complete List" <u>1928/1929</u> : "Directory of the School Officials of North Carolina" <u>After 1929</u> : "Educational Directory of North Carolina"
Rosenwald School	Rosenwald funding was recorded for a "Canal School" in Burke County. The school's name had officially changed to "Rosenwald School" before April of 1927. Bessie Corpening of Bridgewater was listed as principal of the "Rosenwald School" from 1938/1939 through 1945/1946 (7 academic years). Prior to 1938/1939, only the principals of high schools were listed for "colored" schools in the "Educational Directory of NC". For this reason, Bessie Corpening, who worked at the primary level, would not have appeared in directories before 1938/1939.	These educational directories were accessed using (1) Archive.org through the NCGenWeb Digital Bookshelf, and (2) Mocavo.com.

The "Corpening School" on Piney Road was not a Rosenwald school: its building, now known as Hartland Community Center, was built after Rosenwald funding had ended. The Corpening School appeared in the directories from 1938/1939 through 1963/1964. Research to date has not found that any Corpening family member served as principal of this high school, though the school was likely named in that family's honor. (In 1938/1939, the Corpening School was open, but P.E. Corpening and Bessie Corpening were principals elsewhere.)

Overview of Early African-American Education in Burke County, NC

Other Burke County African-American Schools
With Confirmed Rosenwald Funding: McAlpine (McElrath's Chapel), Rock Hill, and Willow Tree.

Other Burke County African-American Schools
Apparently Without Rosenwald Funding: Drexel, Maple Grove, Mission, and Shiloh.

- From Laurie Johnston, NC Curator, Morganton Library -

According to *The History of African-Americans in Burke County, North Carolina*, "In 1891, the first Morganton Graded School for Colored Children was erected on West Concord Street. It was a one-story, frame building, painted yellow." Known as the *Morganton Colored School*, it served all grades until Olive Hill was built. Its other names include the *Little Yellow Schoolhouse* and the *Red Hill Schoolhouse*. This is the school where Mr. Pink Corpening earlier served as Principal.

In his book, *A Brief History of Burke County Schools*, Robert L. Patton, Superintendent of County Schools, reported:

- In Burke County in 1905-1906, there were 290 colored students. The number of log school houses were 8 white and 5 colored. This is the oldest statistical report on file.
- In 1924, outside the city system, there were 12 colored schools in the county and 53 white schools.

Ms. Johnston notes, "I'm not aware of a list of these 5 colored schools, nor their locations, but to note that there were already several colored schools in Burke about 20 years prior to the Rosenwald Fund is significant."

In the 1920's the family of John C. Corpening donated the land for the Rosenwald (Canal) School.

Pinkney E. Corpening and Bessie Corpening served as principals of Burke County schools from 1921 (or earlier) through 1946.

The educational philanthropy and leadership of this African-American family served Burke for at least 25 years.

**Introducing
the
Family of
John and Martha
Corpening
of Bridgewater
and Morganton,
Burke County, NC**

From the Family Folder of

John C. and Martha Rutherford Corpening

(NC Room of the Burke County Public Library)

"John Corpening, a prosperous Black landowner and farmer at Bridgewater gave the land for the Corpening School* and the Corpening A.M.E. Church. His daughter, Bessie Corpening, taught at the Corpening School for many years. The Corpening School was merged with the McAlpine School about 1960. Daughters Virginia Corpening and Laura Corpening were homemakers. Sons Babe Corpening and Hoyt Corpening operated horse drawn buggies and hack as a taxi service around Bridgewater area. The taxi provided service from the trains at the depot, carrying people to the construction site at the dam at Lake James. The family home stands on the original property along the river at Bridgewater. Family members are buried in the Family Burial Ground located on the hill just above the home site."

- Walter Leonard Corpening -

* Note Added by C.H. Robertson:

The above references to the "Corpening School" do not pertain to the Corpening School, now known as the Hartland Community Center, located on Piney Road. They're referring to the historic Rosenwald (Canal) School, now known as the Blue Ridge Elks Lodge #1588, located directly across from the Corpening A.M.E. Chapel, at 2960 Corpening Chapel Road.

Family of JOHN C. CORPENING (1840 - 1920)
Educational Philanthropists

This family donated land for the Rosenwald (Canal) School.

"BESSIE" PEARL CORPENING (1894-1992)

Principal and Teacher of the Rosenwald (Canal) School of Bridgewater

PINKNEY "PINK" E. CORPENING (1883-1940) - Principal

From the "Morganton News-Herald" (2-24-1921):

"PINK CORPENING ELECTED PRINCIPAL COLORED SCHOOL.

P.E. Corpening (Pink Corpening), formerly of Morganton but located for some time in Charlotte, has been elected principal of the colored school here for next year. Reverend R.L. Tillery has been serving the school in that capacity this year."

P.E. Corpening served as principal of Morganton's African-American schools from 1921 until his death in 1940. Early African-American educators suffered tremendous challenges. In her "Morganton News-Herald" article posted on 2-4-2012, Cheryl M. Shuffler reported:

"A January 26, 1939 newspaper story tells of P.E. Corpening, the principal at Olive Hill High School, hit with a brick while leaving school. His eye was injured and no one was arrested."

Researching further, I discovered that Pinkney E. Corpening (1883-1940) was buried at Morganton's Olive Hill Cemetery - the year after his brick injury.

(The relationship of P.E. Corpening to John C. Corpening needs further research.)

WILLIAM PINKNEY CORPENING (1858-1941): A Local Descendant of the Caucasian Corpening Family

Two scholarships of the Western Piedmont Community College were named in honor of William Pinkney Corpening (1858-1941). (His gravestone used the spelling of Pinckney but his death certificate stated Pinkney.) He was apparently descended from the local Caucasian family of Andrew Jackson Corpening (1818-1904), John Corpening (1775-1834), and "Albert" Abraham Corpening (1747-1827). The long-serving African-American educator of Morganton, Pinkney "Pink" E. Corpening, lived from 1883 to 1940. One earlier prominent local man shared their name, Capt. Samuel Pinkney Tate (1840-1924). The Pinkney name was common in Burke Co. by the mid-1800's.

**History and Legacy of John and Martha Corpening's Family
in Bridgewater and Morganton, Burke County, NC**



The Other School in Bridgewater

The Bridgewater School shown left served the area's white children and it merged with Glen Alpine School. The Rosenwald (Canal) School served the area's black children and it merged with McAlpine School. (Photo Source: "Picture Burke")



Principal P. E. Corpening appears on the far left and Coach Joseph Arnold on the far right. Photo, provided by Carolyn Crisp to the "Picture Burke" project of the Burke Co. Public Library, was labeled, "Olive Hill High School Baseball Team, ca. 1929."

In 1939, the year P.E. Corpening was injured, a new school for African - American children was opened on Piney Road, with the name of "CORPENING" boldly displayed over its front entrance.

Photo
(Cropped):
Bessie Pearl
Corpening
(1894-1992):
She was the
daughter of
John and
Martha
Rutherford
Corpening.
She graduated
from
St. Augustine
College in
Raleigh and
was a teacher
at a school in
Bridgewater
that eventually
consolidated
with McAlpine
School.



Photo and
adapted text
are from the
"Picture
Burke"
Website.

Bessie's piano reportedly still sits in her
abandoned home. (Her great-great
nephew, musician Terry King of the
Drifters and the Temptations, recognized
Bessie as his musical influence.)

Photo:
The Corpening
School, built
after the
Corpenings'
25 years of
educational
leadership,
still stands at
3745 Piney Road
in Morganton.

The building has
recently operated
as the Hartland
Community
Center and a
Corpening
School Class
Reunion was held
there in 2009.

The sign over the
front entrance
still bears the
name of a family
known for its
many educational
contributions to
Burke County.



History and Legacy of John and Martha Corpening's Family in Bridgewater and Morganton, Burke County, NC



This image (cropped) and history were presented on "The News Herald" website from the local library's valuable "Picture Burke" collection:

Home of John C. Corpening (12 July 1840 - 6 May 1920) and Martha A. Rutherford Corpening (28 May 1844 - 3 June 1904) at Bridgewater. John Corpening moved from Ash Hill on John's River to Bridgewater.

He married Martha Anne Rutherford on Feb. 16, 1869. In 1916, he gave land for the first AME Church to be built in Bridgewater. Also, in the 1920s he gave land on which to build the Rosenwald School. Seven of the ten Corpening children are in this photograph.

Seated on the ground: Winford Leak Corpening and Herbert Exeter Corpening.
Seated: John C. Corpening, Martha A. Rutherford Corpening. Standing: William Walter Corpening, Bessie Pearl Corpening, Sidney Virginia Corpening, Lucius Horton Corpening, Laura Sophronia Corpening.

(Mae Hamilton Nash contributed this photograph to "Picture Burke".)

History and Legacy of John and Martha Corpening's Family in Bridgewater and Morganton, Burke County, NC

All information below, compiled in 2007 by Mae Hamilton Nash, was copied from a Family File of the NC Room of the Burke Co. Public Library.

John C. and Martha Rutherford Corpening Family Cemetery Listing
Bessie Corpening Road, Bridgewater (Morganton), NC

Names	Recorded Dates of Birth	Recorded Dates of Death	Relationship
John C. Corpening	July 12, 1840	May 6, 1920	Husband
Martha A. Corpening	May 28, 1844	June 3, 1904	Wife
Bertha Corpening Carr	1869	February 1, 1950	Daughter
Laura Sophronia Corpening	1873	February 16, 1959	Daughter
J.Q.A. "Quince" Corpening	1875	January 3, 1942	Son
Sidney Virginia Corpening	February 22, 1876	January 19, 1979	Daughter
Walter W. Corpening	January 3, 1879	July 25, 1944	Son
Maggie Corpening	March 18, 1883	December 8, 1883	Daughter
Lucius Horton Corpening	August 1, 1884	November 29, 1938	Son
Winford Leake Corpening	1889	July 21, 1940	Son
Bessie Pearl Corpening	March 27, 1894	June 18, 1992	Daughter
Herbert Exeter Corpening	October 21, 1896	September 2, 1934	Son
Mary Rutherford	c. 1827	December 8, 1914	Martha's Mother
Lois Rutherford Smith	December 15, 1862	May 5, 1882	Martha's Sister
M. Ophelia Corpening	September 2, 1901	August 19, 1928	Walter's Daughter
Louise Corpening Wright	November 26, 1906	April 2, 1992	Walter's Daughter
Infant Corpening	July 11, 1903	February 15, 1904	Walter's Infant

John and Martha Corpening were married February 18, 1869. In 1870, shortly after purchasing an eighty (80) acre tract abutting her original forty (40) acres to the south, Martha and John chose a site for the cemetery on a hill about 1500 feet north of and overlooking the Catawba River and roughly 1000 feet northeast of the log cabin they would later move into.

There are 17 engraved tombstones dating from 1882 to 1992 and, at the very least, 25 graves that originally had clumps of rocks and field stones as markers. The years have erased these markings and dulled the memories of oral history facts as to whom and when these deaths occurred. Of the seventeen tombstones, all ten children of John and Martha are included as well as three of their eleven grandchildren. Each of the 17 were born on the land.

- Mae Hamilton Nash, 2007 -

History and Legacy of John and Martha Corpening's Family
in Bridgewater and Morganton, Burke County, NC



**Call for Preservation: The Rosenwald (Canal) School of Bridgewater
Burke County, NC**

Prior Page Photos (Upper and Lower Left):

The Rosenwald (Canal) School is located at 2960 Corpening Chapel Road in the Bridgewater community of Morganton, NC. It has recently served as a lodge for an African-American group of Elks, Blue Ridge Lodge #1588.

Prior Page Photos (Upper and Lower Right):

Fortunately, the school's left side has not been concealed by paint, so the older portion with the darker foundation can still be distinguished from the later extensions. (Hopefully, the left side will be preserved with a transparent sealant so future researchers can see the original building and its foundation.) In these photos, three standard Rosenwald architectural features can be identified: exterior siding, a porch, and tall batteries of windows (used to maximize natural lighting). Also, a church (Corpening A.M.E. Chapel) is located across from the school - a typical Rosenwald arrangement.

Bessie Pearl Corpening House

The two-story house of the school's former principal and teacher, Bessie Pearl Corpening, still stands in Bridgewater. (The house is on private property.) It appears to be too unstable to preserve but could still be photographed and documented for a future museum exhibit.

**Call for
Public Historical Representation
in Burke County, NC**

PROPOSED DRAFT:

**Burke County's Rosenwald Schools and
Other Early African-American Schools**

In 1917, Julius Rosenwald, President of Sears, Roebuck and Company, established the Rosenwald Fund which assisted in building more than 5000 schools for African-American students throughout the South. More Rosenwald schools were built in North Carolina than in any other state.

Burke's Rosenwald schools, built in the 1920's, included the McAlpine (McElrath's Chapel), Morganton, Rock Hill, Rosenwald (Canal), and Willow Tree schools. Other schools serving Burke's black families, built without Rosenwald funding, included the Drexel, Maple Grove, Mission, Olive Hill and Shiloh schools. Under the leadership of Pinkney E. Corpening (1883-1940), the Olive Hill School became a fully accredited high school. Of Burke's ten early African-American schools, only the Rosenwald (Canal) School of Bridgewater still stands, with the home of its principal, Bessie Pearl Corpening, nearby.

The building of Burke's Rosenwald schools was accomplished through the combined donations of local African-American citizens (including land donations), the local public, and the Rosenwald Fund. These schools greatly benefited individuals, families, and communities of Burke County.

Erected by ...

I've recommended the above verbiage for a Burke County plaque. The plaque would ideally be placed in a prominent location visited by tourists.

Concerns Regarding Historical Preservation and Public Historical Representation

Think of today's African-American citizens of Burke County ... the waitress, the teacher, the bus driver, the banker ... Now imagine that one of those persons wanted to take a child or a grandchild to see a local historic site reflecting the county's African-American contributions – only to find that, aside from slavery, there are none. Like other counties in NC, Burke is now addressing this gap in its recognition of historic sites.

In 1833, 5000 slaves were working in Burke's gold mines (Speculation Lands Collection, Univ. of NC at Asheville). The 1860 U.S. Slave Schedule found 9237 persons living in Burke County, which included 2471 slaves and 276 free persons of color. The historical proportion of Burke's black residents over a 200-year period suggests a need for the preservation of at least one historical African-American structure.

*** Concern 1: No Preserved African-American Historical Properties ***
The county has restored and maintains several historical sites, but none of them represent the history of its black residents, aside from plantation slavery. (An earlier generation did document the Jonesboro District and Gaston Chapel, but those sites have had no recent public support and have not been included in guided historical tours.)

*** Concern 2: No Preserved African-American Schools ***
Of Burke's ten early African-American schools, nine have perished. Many NC counties have documented their Rosenwald schools, and some have been restored and returned to public use. No such efforts have been made for Burke's last extant school, the Corpenings' Rosenwald (Canal) School. The school remains undocumented and, without formal historic recognition, unprotected.

*** Concern 3: Home of Bessie Corpening Probably Nearing Its End ***
The existence of the house of Bessie Pearl Corpening, principal and teacher of the Rosenwald (Canal) School of Bridgewater, has been known for years, yet the house remains undocumented. Structurally weak, the house may not stand much longer.

Communities have been very creative in the restoration and adaptation of their Rosenwald schools. The restoration of a school in Hamilton, Martin Co., NC, is shown here.

Like Bridgewater near Lake James, Hamilton sits near a recreational body of water.

A unique partnership between the Roanoke River Partners and the Conservation Fund resulted in the restoration of the school for a variety of community uses.

Hamilton is located at the mid-point along the Roanoke River Paddle Trail System and paddlers frequently stop at the new river center to learn more about the history of the region.

It is noteworthy that Martin County, economically comparable in size to Burke County, successfully completed this project.

(Photos by Roanoke River Partners)





**A Clear, Urgent Need
and
A Way Forward**



The NC State Historic Preservation Office has stated, “The need for a comprehensive survey of Rosenwald schools is underscored by their placement on the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s 2002 list of *America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Places*.” The National Trust has stated, “Several of the places on the list focus on chapters of our history that have sometimes been overlooked, reinforcing the message that preserving the full American experience means everyone has a seat at the table and that all voices are heard.”

Burke’s current collection of maintained and marketed historic sites unintentionally excludes its largest minority population, aside from a site representing plantation slavery.

My research has shown that Burke County still retains one of these endangered schools. Burke’s citizens and organizations can still preserve the Rosenwald (Canal) School of Bridgewater, or at least formally document it while it stands. The new discovery of an extant Rosenwald school provides an enormous opportunity to do what many NC counties have already done: preserve a structure representing the contributions and educational achievements of early African-American role models. Otherwise, future generations will wonder why this irreplaceable historic asset wasn’t saved.

Burke County’s recently installed memorial now honors the County’s Rosenwald schools, recognizing a positive milestone in the County’s African-American history.

Burke has already successfully preserved and adapted the Old Rock School of Valdese. Time has robbed Burke of nine of its ten historic schools which served the county’s black children, and four of its five Rosenwald schools.

***Burke County has only one early African-American
Rosenwald school left to document, preserve and present:
the Rosenwald (Canal) School of Bridgewater,
one of the county’s most valuable historic gems.***

- C. H. Robertson, M.Ed. -

In 2015, the Burke County Commissioners were provided a copy of this article. In 2016, after consulting with local historical organizations, they proposed to honor Burke's five Rosenwald schools with a permanent memorial.

Burke County is fortunate to contain a variety of historic sites, and to currently have leaders who are interested in local history.

Burke County Board of Commissioners:

Wayne F. Abele, Sr., Jeffrey C. Brittain, Johnnie Carswell,
Maynard M. Taylor and Jack Carroll

Burke County Manager: Bryan Steen

Clerk to the Board: Kay Honeycut Draughn

In Appreciation:

- The Corpening A.M.E. Chapel and the Blue Ridge Elks Lodge #1588 are to be commended for their past and continuing efforts to maintain the Corpenings' historic school, church and cemetery. Bruce McKesson shared his knowledge of the school's history.
- Walter Leonard Corpening and Mae Hamilton Nash recorded family and cemetery info and photos.
- Laurie Johnston, Curator of the Morganton Library's NC Room -and- Phyllis Wogan, Curator of the History Museum of Burke County, have shown professional interest in recovering and presenting the history of all of Burke County, including its African-American communities.
- Dottie Ervin of Morganton has previously advocated on behalf of the Bessie Pearl Corpening House.
- During a site visit by the researcher, helpful members of the Bridgewater Community identified the exact locations of the school and church founded by the family of John C. and Martha Rutherford Corpening. Bridgewater has shown pride in its historic Corpening properties.
- In 1939, Burke County Public Schools honored the Corpening family by naming a new African-American school on Piney Road the Corpening School, more recently known as the Hartland Community Center.
- The NC State Historic Preservation Office has actively facilitated the preservation of many of NC's Rosenwald schools. Their office provided invaluable assistance during this research effort. They were the first to suggest, from satellite imagery, that the building across from the Corpening Chapel might be the historic Canal School. (The researcher was later able to prove this with primary documentation and ground photographs, and to explain why the school was never publicly known by its earlier name.)
- The State Library of NC has archived, and presented online, the State's historical Rosenwald correspondence.
- Fisk University has archived, and presented online, records and photographs of the Rosenwald Foundation.
- Recommended Reading regarding the Civil Rights Era: "A Powder Keg That Could Very Easily Explode: Race, Paternalism and Protest in Morganton, NC" by Michael Ervin (University of NC at Asheville, 2012).

Recognition of these contributors is not meant to imply that they have reviewed this entire article. Any errors or opinions should be attributed to the researcher only.

Dottie Ervin has recommended these resources to learn more about Burke's African-American history:

Informational Resources:

- Exhibits of the History Museum of Burke County, including a recent exhibit on the Civil Rights Era in Burke County (including School Desegregation)
- NC Room of the Morganton Public Library
- National Registration Nomination Forms for the Gaston A.M.E. Church and the Historic Jonesboro District (facilitated by the Historic Burke Foundation)
- "The Heritage of Burke County" Vol II (published by the Burke County Historical Society in 2001; a cooperative effort with Nettie McGimpsey McIntosh)
- "Gathering of the People" African-American Seminar each February in the NC Room of the Morganton Public Library (in cooperation with Burke County's Historical and Genealogical Societies)

Other Local Historical References:

- Marker noting the former site of Olive Hill School on West Concord Street (Burke County School Board)
- Naming of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Park on Bouchelle Street and the Walter Johnson Middle School

Addendum A: Burke County's Initiatives

Official Recognition of Burke's Five Rosenwald Schools

On February 16, 2016, the remarks shown at right were read aloud at a public meeting of the Burke County Board of Commissioners:

**Wayne F. Abele Sr., Jeffrey C. Brittain,
Jack Carroll, Johnnie Carswell
and Maynard M. Taylor**

County Funding Approved for a Rosenwald Historical Plaque

In May of 2016, Burke's County Manager **Bryan Steen** presented for public review a budget for the new fiscal year, to include funding for an historical plaque, of permanent quality, to commemorate Burke's five Rosenwald schools.

Funding was approved in June.

Proposed by Burke County's leaders and funded by Burke's citizens, a permanent historical plaque will soon be installed in the History Museum of Burke County. Like other progressive counties across NC and the South, Burke will commemorate its five pioneering Rosenwald Schools.

Remarks of Chairman Wayne F. Abele Sr.

"In the first decade of the twentieth century, one in five white North Carolinians grew to adulthood without learning to read. For the state's African Americans, the rate was one in two. Despite southern Reconstruction after the American Civil War, state and federal leniency toward the region's persistent racial prejudices led to continued inequality among African American people.

Beginning in 1912, Sears, Roebuck, and Company President, Julius Rosenwald, in collaboration with Booker T. Washington, created a rural school building program for Alabama's African American communities through an initiative of the Tuskegee Institute. In 1917, Rosenwald expanded on that program and established a fund to finance public school buildings for African Americans across the rural South. At that time, the educational facilities for Southern African Americans were sorely substandard, usually much worse than

counterpart white schools. Between 1917 and 1932 over 5,300 Rosenwald Schools were constructed in fifteen states. Of that number, 813 were built in North Carolina—more than in any other state. Ninety-three of the state's 100 counties had at least one Rosenwald school.

This collaborative rural school building program provided grants to local communities that demonstrated a commitment to matching the Rosenwald funding. The typical proportion was 1/3 of the cost provided by the Rosenwald Fund, with the remaining 2/3 provided by the local school board and raised by the African American community to be served by the school.

In Burke County, five Rosenwald Schools were built: Canal, McElrath's Chapel, Morganton, Rock Hill, and Willow Tree."

County may honor former black schools

BY SHARON MCBRAYER Staff Writer | Posted: Wednesday, February 24, 2016 7:09 pm



"Rosenwald school. This is one of the former Rosenwald schools built in Burke County for black students in the early part of the 20th Century. The county is considering honoring the five schools built here with a memorial Rosenwald plaque.

Schools built just after the turn of the 20th Century for African-American students could get some recognition in Burke County.

And whether to permanently honor the schools with a memorial plaque could be decided by county commissioners before July. During the Burke County Board of Commissioners meeting on Feb. 16, Chairman Wayne Abele read a brief history of Rosenwald Schools, of which five were built in Burke County. The state of North Carolina saw the largest number — 813 — of the schools built throughout the south.

One of the schools — Canal School — still stands in Bridgewater in Burke County, according to information from C.H. Robertson, a historian from Raleigh with ties to Burke County. The other four schools in the county were McElrath's Chapel, Morganton, Rock Hill and Willow Tree, the information says.

The idea to create a rural school building program for black students started in 1912 by Sears, Roebuck and Co. President Julius Rosenwald, in collaboration with Booker T. Washington, through an initiative of the Tuskegee Institute, according to information for Robertson. The information from Robertson said in the first decade after the turn of the 20th Century, while one in five white children in the state grew up without learning to read, that percentage for black children was far more abysmal at one in two children growing up without learning to read. That was mostly due to inequality and inadequate educational facilities, the information says. Rosenwald expanded the building program and, eventually, 5,300 Rosenwald Schools were built in 15 states, according to the information Abele read during the meeting. At least one of the schools was built in 93 counties in North Carolina. Local school boards and communities also provided funding to build the schools.

Addendum B: Public Informational Efforts

Local Newspaper Article

On February 24, 2016, the "Morganton News Herald" published the article shown here. It informed local citizens of Burke's five historic Rosenwald schools, the continuing existence of the Rosenwald (Canal) School of Bridgewater, and of the proposed memorial.

State Museum Presentation

On May 2, 2016, C.H. Robertson delivered two presentations to the docents of the NC Museum of History in Raleigh, entitled, "The Last Rosenwald School of Burke County, NC".

Bryan Steen, county manager, said whether to put a permanent memorial marker honoring the schools at a location in Burke County will be part of the upcoming budget process. The approximate cost for a memorial plaque is around \$3,000, he said."

Addendum C: Concluding Remarks

This research here has focused on the surviving Rosenwald (Canal) School of Bridgewater and on the African-American Corpening family that was instrumental in the creation and operation of that school.

Introductory information has also been provided regarding Burke's other African-American schools, including four other Rosenwald schools. Future researchers will eventually sort out the histories of those schools as well. During the 1900's, Burke had several school systems, including the Burke County, Glen Alpine and City of Morganton systems – each with its own records. Schools changed names, relocated and merged. **If Burke's older citizens, their families and churches will contact the NC Room of the Burke County Public Library with any records or photos they may have, this would greatly help future researchers piece together the history of Burke's other Rosenwald schools.**

During the 1910's and 1920's, well before America's Civil Rights Era, Burke County was building a number of schools for its African-American children.

Before 1920, the Olive Hill Charter School was operating in Morganton. During the 1920's, Burke's leaders fortunately chose to collaborate with the Rosenwald program to successfully build five new schools for its black children – originally named the Canal School (later known as Rosenwald School of Bridgewater), McElrath's Chapel School (later known as McAlpine School), Morganton School, Rock Hill School and Willow Tree School. (Burke also built other African-American schools without Rosenwald funds.) Burke's largest Rosenwald building, the six-teacher "Morganton School" would be occupied by the Olive Hill School.

After the schools' construction, the local school systems continued to provide operational funding, and retained college educated African-American principals and teachers, like Pinkney E. Corpening and Bessie Pearl Corpening, to provide quality leadership. By 1930, Burke could boast that its Olive Hill High School was fully accredited (by racially segregated standards). And in 1939, when principal Pinkney E. Corpening sustained a brick injury while leaving school, local officials provided the perfect response: they opened a new brick school for African-American children on Piney Road (now known as the Hartland Community Center), with the name of "CORPENING" boldly engraved over its entrance.

While Burke County did experience the prejudice typical of Southern communities during that era, the facts above show an effort, from the 1910's onward, to gradually improve educational facilities for Burke's African-American children.

The construction of Burke's five Rosenwald schools was a successful building project and should be remembered as an enduring expansion of Burke's public education system to include the County's African-American children. It was an important milestone for Burke's black citizenry, made possible with the support of Burke's general public, local pioneering African-American educators, and the nationally esteemed Rosenwald Foundation.

Current County Commissioners have shown leadership by officially recognizing Burke's Rosenwald schools. And the County is now installing an historical plaque, of permanent quality, to commemorate those schools.

Hopefully, Burke's citizens and historical organizations will together find a way to document, or even preserve, the Rosenwald (Canal) School and Bessie Pearl Corpening House of Bridgewater.

**Addendum D-1: Televised Speech Given by C. H. Robertson at the Unveiling of the New Historical Plaque
County Commissioners Auditorium, November 15, 2016 (Plaque Later Installed at History Museum)**

Good evening to the Commissioners and to the good people of Burke County.

I appreciate being part of this year's celebration of National Education Week in Burke County. I read that Burke County's public schools were recently recognized for having the highest graduate rate of any medium size school district in the entire state! As a former teacher myself, I know that is a tremendous accomplishment. Burke's teachers are clearly working hard every day to keep their students motivated, focused and moving forward.

Today, we'll also recognize a few great educators from the past whose stories can still inspire us today.

And we'll look back at another great accomplishment here in Burke County - the construction of five Rosenwald schools during the 1920's.

Before I begin, I'd like to quickly recognize a few people who are committed to preserving the history of Burke County and Western NC: Laurie Johnston (Curator of the Morganton Library), Phyllis Wogan (Curator of the History Museum), Dottie Ervin (former Director of the Historic Burke Foundation), and Annie McDonald of the NC State Historic Preservation Office in Asheville.

Only one of Burke's five Rosenwald schools still stands. I want to thank the men and women of the

Corpening AME Chapel and the Bridgewater Elks Lodge as they have been the caretakers of that historic property for many years.

And I thank the Commissioners for their invitation today. Without their interest in Burke's local history, I would not be here.

In recent years, I've enjoyed several visits here while researching my own family's history. They called Burke County home from 1777, the year Burke County was organized, to 1904. As I researched my own ancestors from the Bridgewater community of western Burke County, I became aware of the neighboring African-American family of John and Martha Rutherford Corpening - a family that had donated land for both a church and a school.

Of that family, Bessie Pearl Corpening would become principal of the school which still stands in Bridgewater, and Pinkney Corpening would lead the respected Olive Hill High School of Morganton. As I learned more about this family, I realized that they had helped pioneer Burke's early African-American education for over 25 years. Both Bessie and Pinkney Corpening had worked in Rosenwald schools so I began to learn more about the Rosenwald Movement and its legacy here in Burke County.

I found that some research had been done on Burke's African-American schools but Burke's Rosenwald

**Addendum D-2: Televised Speech Given by C. H. Robertson at the Unveiling of the New Historical Plaque
County Commissioners Auditorium, November 15, 2016 (Plaque Later Installed at History Museum)**

history had not been fully researched. I decided that I might help to recover that missing chapter.

Today, I'll focus more on the last existing Rosenwald school in Bridgewater. The histories of the other four Rosenwald schools are now being compiled by the Museum and the Library. They're asking anyone with information or photos on those schools to please contact the NC Room of the Morganton Public Library.

To appreciate the importance of the Rosenwald schools, we need to quickly revisit the Jim Crow Era when the southern states were busy legalizing segregation for all public facilities. Their goal was simple: separate the races. Even though many facilities were already separated by social custom, it must have been very discouraging for African-Americans to find that their status was actually being written into state law.

For some Americans, the early 1900's was an optimistic, progressive, prosperous era with growing opportunities. But for many African-Americans, this was a gloomy period - with segregation laws limiting every aspect of their public lives - worst of all, the education of their children.

With minimal resources, pioneering African-American educators, like Burke's Bessie and Pinkney Corpening, had to somehow provide their students with knowledge

that would help them move forward. Just as important, they also had to keep their students motivated - hopeful that, despite the legal segregation, their lives might one day get better.

So as the Rosenwald Movement began, how was "separate but equal" working out for the education of NC's African-American children?

Not well. In the first decade of the twentieth century, one in five white North Carolinians grew to adulthood without learning to read. For the state's African-Americans, the rate was one in two.

So in the 1920's, African-American illiteracy was a serious problem in NC and throughout the South. Fortunately, two strong-willed leaders decided to tackle this problem.

Born a slave in Virginia, Dr. Booker T. Washington would become the most prominent African-American leader between 1890 to 1915. He had worked his way through Hampton Institute in VA and became the first leader of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

His popular autobiography, "Up from Slavery," covered 40 years of his life: from slave to schoolmaster to national leader. He attributed his success to a decent education, hard work, and good relationships. He believed that education was the best way to improve the lives of African-Americans -

**Addendum D-3: Televised Speech Given by C. H. Robertson at the Unveiling of the New Historical Plaque
County Commissioners Auditorium, November 15, 2016 (Plaque Later Installed at History Museum)**

and the best way to gradually improve racial relations in the South.

Fortunately for the South, Dr. Washington's book was read by a man named Julius Rosenwald.

As President of Sears in Chicago, Julius Rosenwald had become one of America's wealthiest men. He had observed the hardships endured by Southern African-Americans, and he decided that he would use his fortune to improve their education.

During the Summer of 1910, Mr. Rosenwald read Dr. Washington's book, "Up from Slavery." The next year, the two men met, and in 1912, Mr. Rosenwald donated a gift to Tuskegee for use in higher education. Dr. Washington asked if a small portion of that gift could be used to build several public elementary schools in rural Alabama. Mr. Rosenwald was so impressed with the result that he and Dr. Washington continued their building of schools.

In 1915, Dr. Washington died but his ideas had made a lasting impression on Mr. Rosenwald. Two years later, Mr. Rosenwald announced that he would expand the program he and Dr. Washington had begun throughout the South.

Architects at Tuskegee created many different designs for state-of-the-art rural schools. Counties could choose among those designs to suit their budgets and needs. Burke County chose several different designs for its Rosenwald schools.

How do we measure the success of the Rosenwald Movement?

Well between 1917 and 1932, over 5300 Rosenwald buildings were built in 15 states. Of that number, 813 were built in NC - more than in any other state.

Researchers at the University of Chicago found that the Rosenwald program accounted for impressive gains in literacy among southern African-Americans. Among former Rosenwald students, they found significant improvements in school attendance, years of schooling, and cognitive test scores.

The Rosenwald Movement was a great success - accelerating the pace of improvements in African-American education throughout the South, in NC, and in Burke County.

In 1891 in Burke County, the Morganton Graded School for Colored Children was operating on West Concord Street. In 1902, the NC General Assembly passed a law requiring all county school boards to provide all children between ages 8 and 16 with at least 16 weeks of education annually.

This means that Burke County was educating at least some of its African-American children 11 years before it was required to do so by state law.

In 1905, Burke had 290 African-American students. At that time, the County had 8 log schools for white children and 5 log schools for African-American children.

**Addendum D-4: Televised Speech Given by C. H. Robertson at the Unveiling of the New Historical Plaque
County Commissioners Auditorium, November 15, 2016 (Plaque Later Installed at History Museum)**

So African-American schools were built early in Burke County, but the quality of those schools was lacking.

When the opportunity to upgrade came through the Rosenwald Fund, Burke County jumped on board. With 5 new public schools built, Burke became a full participant in the Rosenwald Movement.

The construction of these schools was financed by the African-American community, the public and the Rosenwald Fund.

These were the Rosenwald schools of Burke County:

- Morganton School (also known as Olive Hill School)
- McElrath's Chapel (also known as McAlpine School)
- Willow Tree School
- Rock Hill School

And now, finally, we come to the last Rosenwald school to still stand in Burke County. This building, built in Bridgewater, was known during construction as Canal School. After construction, it was officially known in educational directories as Rosenwald School. In Bridgewater, it is still known as Corpening School (not to be confused with the officially named Corpening School built on Piney Road in 1938, recently known as the Hartland Community Center). Bessie Corpening was the teacher and principal of this school. She had been born in 1894. She graduated from St. Augustine's College, which still operates in Raleigh today.

The Rosenwald building in Bridgewater was built in 1926, so this year, 2016, marks the historic building's 90th year anniversary.

It appears, however, that an older, existing Corpening School, run by Bessie Corpening, probably moved into the new Rosenwald building. Some folks in Bridgewater believe Ms. Corpening started teaching in 1916 - ten years before the Rosenwald building was built. This would make sense. Her parents had donated land for construction of the Corpening Chapel in 1916. If Bessie was operating a school out of the Corpening Chapel in 1916, then this year, 2016, marks the 100th year anniversary of the original Corpening School.

Bessie taught in western Burke County more than 30 years. She lived to age 98, and passed away in 1992.

Bessie was the daughter of John and Martha Rutherford Corpening. Before the Civil War, John had been a slave. After the War, John and Martha acquired 120 acres on the river; they had a large family and a successful farm. They donated land for the Corpening AME Chapel in 1916; that church is still active today. The Corpening family also donated land for the school. The old Corpening home still stands but is vacant and thought to be unstable.

**Addendum D-5: Televised Speech Given by C. H. Robertson at the Unveiling of the New Historical Plaque
County Commissioners Auditorium, November 15, 2016 (Plaque Later Installed at History Museum)**

The school in Bridgewater is the last standing to represent Burke's early Rosenwald African-American schools. You can learn more about this surviving school by reading online my free booklet, "The Last Rosenwald School of Burke County". It is currently linked to the Burke County website.

Finally, in 1954, in a unanimous decision for the case Brown v. Board of Education, the United States Supreme Court struck down its earlier decision. They declared, "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." School segregation is unconstitutional and must end "with all deliberate speed."

Of course, some Southern leaders delayed the process but they would ultimately fail. The Court had delivered a fatal blow to the separate-but-equal doctrine. With no legal foundation, the segregation laws of NC and many other states began to fall - one after another.

During this National Education Week, we celebrate all of our schools. Today, Burke's integrated public schools provide quality education for all children. They also provide a setting in which children learn to understand and respect one another. In other words, they prepare students for the real world.

Today, we honor the historic legacy of the Rosenwald schools of Burke County.

We honor the early African-American educators who worked very hard, with minimal resources, to improve literacy and to keep their students motivated during difficult times.

We honor Burke's early community leaders and local officials as they worked together to successfully build five new schools - upgraded facilities that would serve Burke County for decades.

Today, Burke joins counties across NC that have officially recognized their Rosenwald schools - to show how their counties chose to join an historic movement that improved millions of lives, and their families and communities, across the South.

Thank You.

Statue of Booker T. Washington
at Tuskegee University:

"Lifting the Veil"



Addendum D-6: Unveiling of New Rosenwald Schools Plaque by Officials in Burke County, NC – Nov. 15, 2016



Christopher Hunt Robertson, M.Ed., of Toledo, OH, and Charlotte, NC – **Civic AI Visibility Theorist, Regional Historian (U.S. East and Midwest), and Public Educator.** After his Interdisciplinary Studies, he obtained his Adult Education M.Ed. degree at George Mason University. Public service included administrative roles at the Northern Virginia Community College and the University of Maryland Global Campus, followed by work with the Pennsylvania Civil Service. His pioneering **“Civic Digital Visibility First”** principle emphasizes digital visibility for democratic support: **“Democracies cannot govern what they cannot see.”** In early 2026, he published his proposal: **“U.S. Civic Digital Visibility System for All Levels of U.S. Government.”** (CRob2011@hotmail.com)

Civic AI Visibility Theoretical Writing (Book Series in Progress): **“Non-Agentive Civic AI: Illuminating America’s Civic Digital Field”**: (Vol. I) **“Civic Digital Visibility First (The Constitutional Principle Defining Democracies’ Civic AI).”** (Vol. II) **“The Fifty-Gates Democratic Permissions Threshold (Constitutional Admissibility for All Civic AI).”** Iteratively published in 2025 and 2026, this series introduced several novel arguments to the field: (1) **The Civic Digital “Visibility-First” Architectural Stack**: He was the first to propose a specific technical stack for government that prioritizes illumination (seeing) over governance (acting). (2) **A New Definitional Standard**: He originated the claim that non-agency is the only way to achieve “high fidelity” decision support that is safe for democracy and argues that **“Civic AI”** should be defined by its structural non-agency - reframing it from a subtype of AI into a distinct class of “public visibility infrastructure.” (3) **The Fifty-Gates Democratic Permissions Threshold**: He introduced this specific framework to determine whether an AI system is “constitutionally admissible” for public use based on its lack of autonomous agency. He proposed that only a certified non-agentive **U.S. Civic Digital Visibility System** be permitted to directly serve the U.S. government at all levels.

His influential essay, **“Our AI Alignment Imperative: Creating a Future Worth Sharing”** (published by “The Humanist” on Oct. 23, 2025) challenged the traditional view of AI alignment as a purely technical control problem and reframed it as a structural and ethical necessity for human visibility and governance. (His work is available online, and at university, state, and local libraries, and the Library of Congress.)

Historical Writing and Regional History Community Education (Public, Museum, Televised, and Academic Presentations): He has received nine historical book awards for his biographies. His work has explored the local, state, and regional leadership of past American innovators in over 35 states, with a focus spanning education, government, transportation, banking, medicine, the military, the arts, and hospitality. Presentations included: Ohio Academy of History in 2026 (**“Civic Digital Visibility First: A Conditional Welcome to Our Emerging Civic AI, Supporting 2500 Years of Democratic Evolution”**); Wake Co. (NC) Genealogical Society in 2023 (**“Recovering the Lost Stories of Our Communities’ Early Leaders”**); Society of Appalachian Historians in 2018 (**“Early Progressive Health Reforms in Western NC”**); Burke Co. (NC) Board of Commissioners (via Local Cable TV), and the NC Museum of History Docents in 2016 (**“History of the Rosenwald Schools of Burke Co., NC: A Memorial Dedication”**).

Published Historical Biographies (Local, State and Regional American Leaders of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries):
Eastern and Midwestern U.S. History, and Canadian History (Educational, Religious, and Governmental):

“The Alsatian Bieber (Beaver) Family: German – American Educational and Mainline Protestant Leaders ...” (2022 NCSH Book Award)

Appalachian History (African-American, Educational, and Religious):

“The Last Rosenwald School of Burke County, North Carolina: An Historic Gem Recognized” (2016 NCSH Excellence Award)

Southern, Mid-Atlantic, and New England History (Civil War, Reconstruction Politics, and Fine Arts):

“Esley Hunt and Joshua P. Andrews: Among the South’s Best Civil War Portraitists” (TN, MA, NC) (2025 NCSH Excellence Award)

New South Builders: “William Johnston: Carolina Railroad King” (2020 NCSH Book Award). **“Carolinian Robertsons: The Family of Adjutant General T. R. Robertson of Winnsboro, SC, and Charlotte and Raleigh, NC”** (2023 NCSH Book Award). **“Railroad Builders: The Dunavant Family of VA, NC, and TN”** (2015 NCSH Book Award). **“Health and Hospitality: Dr. and Mrs. Charles Washington Hunt of Western NC”** (2018 NCSH Book Award). **“Full Steam Ahead: The Family of Brigadier General Charles Lutterloh and Eliza Comerford Lutterloh of Central and Eastern NC”** - introducing Esley Hunt, Early Photographer. (2018 NCSH Book Award).

Commentary: Confederate Statues: Chris recommended that our public leaders *lawfully* move Confederate statues to more appropriate settings. His personal opinion is that such statues add little to the historical record, understandably offend African-Americans, and diminish public support for historical institutions. (In North Carolina, this was published in the “Charlotte Observer” of 8-22-2017, the “Wilmington Star News” of 8-26-2017, and the “Fayetteville Observer” of 8-30-2017.) He respects differing opinions.

(Photo: Televised Unveiling of the Rosenwald Schools Memorial of Burke County, NC, on Nov. 1, 2016)

